



Dana E. Blackwell  
Executive Director

# LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW, VICE CHAIR  
DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS  
STACEY F. WINKLER

## APPROVED MINUTES

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The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **June 5, 2006**, in room 739 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

### COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi  
Helen A. Kleinberg  
Hon. Joyce Fahey  
Susan F. Friedman  
Daisy Ma  
Dr. La-Doris McClaney  
Rev. Cecil L. Murray  
Wendy L. Ramallo  
Sandra Rudnick  
Adelina Sorkin

### COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Patricia Curry  
Ann E. Franzen  
Dr. Harriette F. Williams  
Stacey F. Winkler

### YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE

Jason Anderson

### APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the June 5, 2006, meeting was unanimously approved.

### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the May 15, 2006, general meeting were unanimously approved.

## **CHAIR'S REPORT**

- The next Commission meeting will focus on relative care and will take place at the department's kinship resource center on Slauson Avenue. Directions will be provided.
- Celebration 06 is scheduled for June 15 at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. All Commissioners should have received an invitation and press kit.
- On June 16, a IV-E waiver Log will take place at the USC Davidson Center, the first in a series of meetings to prepare for and receive input on the waiver. Chair Kleinberg and Dana Blackwell met with Joan Smith this week to talk about how the Commission's proposed continuum of care and its committees fit within waiver plans.
- Chair Kleinberg welcomed Katie Fesler as the Commission's liaison to County Counsel. Ralph Rosato has been promoted to division chief of general litigation, and Chair Kleinberg thanked him for his help and dedication over the years.
- Following the presentation by Hollywood CPR at the Commission's April 17 meeting, an unprecedented 50 youth attended the organization's most recent orientation, and 35 have enrolled in the program. ILP coordinators will be holding their next monthly meeting at the agency.
- Questions posed to Michael Rauso at the March 20 meeting about the wraparound program's referral and training process are still being researched, and a presentation will be made at a later date.

## **MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT**

As part of the chair's report, Chair Kleinberg asked Garrison Smith to report on May 19's mental health summit, part of a three-year foster youth mental health initiative funded by The California Endowment. An advisory group worked for nearly a year to identify ten areas for this one-day dialogue, and invited 300 decision-makers, providers, youth, and others to participate. About 150 attended, adding their diverse views and expertise to the various breakout sessions. Speakers and panel members included former Assemblymember Darryl Steinberg, author of the Mental Health Services Act; Areta Crowell, a former director of the county's Department of Mental Health; and Bill Carter from the California Institute for Mental Health. One member of a lunchtime youth panel urged everyone "not to medicate heartache as if it were a mental health issue."

The summit's sessions were recorded, and Mr. Smith is preparing a written report that should be available by the end of this summer. The initiative now has two years to create mechanisms to implement change, build communities, and introduce relevant legislation.

## **RESOURCE FAMILIES**

Karen Richardson from DCFS's adoption and permanency resources division reviewed the origin of the resource family concept, which builds on the fact that most children adopted from the child welfare system are adopted by their foster families. Recruiting and preparing families as both foster and adoptive families—using common home studies,

training, background checks, and other procedures—is one way to expedite permanency options for children in custody.

In 2000, Casey Family Programs studied the challenges and realities of dual preparation in four states, and California resumed discussions about integrating the assessment and licensing of all out-of-home caregivers in 2005. AB 2161, introduced in February 2006, would authorize a three-year pilot project in five counties to streamline the assessment process for relatives, foster families, and adoptive parents. It would retain comprehensive criminal background check requirements, psychosocial assessments, and home inspections, and add an evaluation of potential risks and need for additional family supports.

In February 2004, DCFS implemented a consolidated home study process for prospective foster and adoptive parents to minimize the number of placement moves for children, accelerate procedures, and avoid unnecessary delays in permanency. The resource family recruitment and family assessment section consolidated outreach and recruitment, the orientation and application process, education and training, and the home study or family assessment. Resource families support the goal of family reunification and, when reunification is not possible, are already approved to provide legal permanence for a child.

Ten orientations a month are held for prospective resource families, who are referred to Community Care Licensing (CCL) to begin the licensing process. Families then attend 33 hours of pre-service training that functions as a mutual selection process and a way for families to decide the level at which they wish to be involved. With the successful completion of the family assessment/home study, families identify their primary interest (foster care, adoption, or both); all are approved at the adoption level and matched with suitable children.

Resource parents provide a safe and healthy home until children can be reunited with their own families. They cooperate with the social worker and the child's parents in carrying out the case plan, respect the biological family's culture and values, assist with family visitation, help the child cope with separation, participate in the child's education, and ensure appropriate medical and dental care. In addition to the support given by the child's social worker, resource families are encouraged to participate in foster and adoptive parent associations, can access the department's adoption promotion supportive services, and undergo continuous training. A support group for parents who had hoped to adopt children who were ultimately reunified with their families is being started this July. Challenges to the resource family concept include the perception that all families are required to adopt, which they are not, and the difficulties that working parents encounter in trying to schedule appropriate visitations. The licensing process is also cumbersome, and a copy of the CCL application is now being included in the orientation packet.

From March 2004 through March 2006, 116 training groups involved over 2,321 participants, of whom 1,523 graduated. Of the resulting 1,114 family assessments, 264 were approved, 841 were deferred or closed (most because of licensing issues, particularly conditions such as improper fencing or lack of space), and only 9 were denied, in some

cases because of a history of serious child abuse. The time to complete a consolidated home study averages around four months.

An evaluation of the resource family model is being performed by the USC School of Social Work, which is surveying approved families for feedback on orientation, training, and placements. The evaluation will also survey families who started the orientation but did not follow through. Roundtable discussions and focus groups with parents at various stages of the process are being held as well. DCFS would like to increase the level of training for the 2,000 foster families approved prior to the implementation of the dual-preparation model, but does not yet have the staff; these families are, though, required to attend annual licensing trainings. (Relative caregivers are trained separately.)

Commissioner Fahey asked about regular updates to the original assessment evaluating the appropriateness of the placement, especially as the family approaches adoption. Ms. Richardson said that the home study is updated when the child is freed for adoption, and the social worker bears the responsibility of assessing whether or not the family is a good match. (If someone in the household is arrested, both DCFS and CCL are notified.) She also noted that if the child is returned home and the reunification fails, the department makes every effort to place the child with the same resource family.

Anticipating a crisis in recruiting qualified staff, Commissioner Biondi asked if the home study must still be performed by staff holding an MSW. According to Ms. Richardson, an AB 2161 work group is looking at waivers to that requirement for dual-preparation resource families, but faces challenges within adoption regulations. Commissioner Biondi then asked about the evaluation's analysis of the statistics, saying that the approval of 264 families after more than 2,300 had expressed interest seemed low. Some families are not ready to follow through, Ms. Richardson said, or may complete the process with a non-county foster family agency, which these statistics do not include. Many families are becoming involved through DCFS's outreach to faith-based organizations, which it wants to increase, as well as from the activities of other county departments.

Vice Chair Sorkin asked about the mixed messages that a child may be given in a family that is simultaneously supporting reunification and desiring to adopt. Ms. Richardson acknowledged those inherent difficulties, but stressed that resource families are told that their primary job is to enable reunification. If necessary, the child's social worker may make referrals to counseling and other supportive services. With regard to possible conflicts of interest in what resource families may tell the court, social workers are sensitive to any possible 'sabotage' of the reunification, and safeguards are put into place if that becomes a concern. The department does attempt to match parents wanting to adopt with children whose likelihood of reunification is low.

Pre-service trainings are offered in both English and Spanish, and families choose which sessions to attend. Because of the training's intensive nature—which includes role-playing and extensive discussions—staff sometimes suggest a switch if they believe it could be beneficial to the family's understanding.

Vernon Brown, with the foster family agency (FFA) arm of Moss Beach Homes, which provides therapeutic foster care and residential services statewide, outlined the private sector's response to the resource family concept. As of April 2006, 1,873 foster children were placed in licensed foster homes in Los Angeles County, and 5,899 foster children in FFA-certified foster homes. Outcome data show that the rate of abuse and neglect in FFA homes is less than the Federal standard, making it the safest type of foster care. Of the county's 69 FFAs, 23 have adoption licenses; most use them to perform adoption home studies for children in their homes, but a few of them dually prepare all their homes. A survey of 27 FFAs (12 dual-licensed for adoption) found they had accounted for 503 foster child adoptions in fiscal year 2004–2005—approximately half of all foster-child adoptions by non-kin in the county. FFAs are strongly supportive of the resource family model, but recognize the duality issues already mentioned in getting families to understand concurrent planning. Moving children now in long-term foster care into permanent situations is one of the most difficult parts of the process.

Sacha Klein, child welfare policy director for the Association of Community Human Service Agencies (ACHSA), reported that many FFAs facilitate the adoption of children by connecting with other adoption-licensed agencies at the termination of parental rights, rather than dually preparing all families from the outset. Only a couple of ACHSA agencies do the latter, since funding strictures generally mean it is done at a financial loss. Obstacles to implementing the resource family model in the private sector include:

- DCFS's increased use of FFA homes as short-term shelter (30 days or less) while relative caregivers are being approved—is it worthwhile to revamp the system when average stays for the entire FFA population may be two weeks or less?
- An insufficient market supply of qualified staff, since adoption programs must be supervised by MSWs or LCSWs with at least two years of adoption experience
- Huge backlogs in the two-step licensing procedure (at the state level and with local CCL), which would increase with a large number of FFAs applying at one time
- A needed culture change of large proportion, moving away from the historical view that foster parents should not pursue the adoption of children in their care
- Additional costs
  - The Private Adoption Agency Reimbursement Program (PAARP) provides \$5,000 for every completed adoption, but a very small percentage are finalized.
  - MSWs with adoption experience are significantly more costly to hire. (Mr. Brown estimated that bilingual MSWs started at between \$45,000 and \$60,000 per year, and Trish Ploehn confirmed the department's starting salary for MSWs at between \$47,484 and \$68,152 per year.)
  - The adoption home study is more comprehensive than that required for foster parent certification, and requires additional staff time.
  - Fingerprint clearances costing \$46 are required for every adult in a foster home, and additional clearances for adoptive homes are also required, at \$100 per adult.

- An agency's adoption license application fee is \$2,500, with an annual renewal fee of \$1,250.
- Staff must be trained to comply with adoption agency regulations, and paperwork must meet separate requirements.
- Costs for the recruitment of families are significant, with additional foster parents needed to replace those who adopt; one FFA reports certification costs of \$17,797 per family, a figure that would increase for dually prepared families.

A work group is meeting to discuss these issues, and has tentatively discussed solutions that include legislation to eliminate redundant foster parent clearances, asking families to pay the \$100 Livescan fee and be reimbursed through adoption tax credits, charging families the cost of the home study and reimbursing them once an adoption is finalized, and reinvesting Title IV-e waiver savings to support FFAs' transition to the resource family model, since it will shorten time in care.

Commissioner Murray checked his understanding that the average adoption timeline—from initial placement to finalized adoption—has been reduced from five years to four, and David Sanders clarified that two to three years of that occurs before the termination of parental rights, when the child is not free to be adopted.

Chair Kleinberg expressed concerns about success being defined as adoption rather than reunification, and asked if the USC evaluation was contacting birth parents for their feedback on the resource family model. (No, Ms. Richardson answered, although a consultant to the focus groups is considering that option.) Many birth parents already feel unsupported and set up for failure, Vice Chair Sorkin commented, especially in cases where they can't financially compete with foster parents who may be taking children to Disneyland, for instance. Whether or not reunification is a viable option should be fairly clear early on, Commissioner Ramallo stated, based on why the child was removed in the first place. Communication between birth and foster parents is essential, and they should work as a team, with birth parents perhaps being included in outings. An entire session of training is devoted to the child's transition back home, Ms. Richardson said, and families are trained from the beginning in visitation, case plans, and coordinating with the child's social worker. In point of engagement, the intensive services worker specifically deals with families who are reunifying, something that never happened in the past. The vast majority of detained children—69 percent in 2003–2004—return to their families, Dr. Sanders said, and changes in social worker and resource family roles are part of the overall system change that supports this reality. Measures regarding reunification in performance-based agency contracts are also getting attention, Ms. Klein said, and rates are being tracked. The private sector is attempting to match departmental interest in making families available to children when parental rights are terminated so that children no longer languish in long-term foster care, but it also realizes that adoption practice is significantly different than providing shelter and support in anticipation of reunification.

Vice Chair Rudnick shared others' concerns about the mixed messages that children may receive when placed with resource families, and Commissioner McClaney particularly

mentioned the overwhelming numbers of children of color who are in care. Training is a constant topic, but children are still in the same position. What is being done now is not working, and needs to be looked at more closely. Commissioner Ma said that she keeps hearing that the responsibility falls on the social worker, yet if a child has an unsophisticated worker, what happens?

Dr. Sanders reminded Commissioners that the ultimate responsibility for the child is borne by the court, whose decisions are based on input from social workers but also consider other factors. Through changes at multiple levels, DCFS has tried to create structures that assure a team approach, so that more than one set of eyes is active on each case. In concurrent planning, adoptions and case-carrying workers function simultaneously, taking primary or secondary roles depending on the stage of the case. Commissioner Fahey also noted the involvement of children's attorneys, who are obligated to advise the court and keep in touch with the child and the child's social workers. Parents' attorneys may provide further input, often fighting any alternative to reunification. Even if a child's attorney believes early on that reunification is not likely, parents' attorneys can make every effort to delay proceedings.

Since many more law schools exist in California than universities offering MSWs, Commissioner Friedman suggested encouraging those institutions to offer a double degree in law and social work, akin to the medical school combination of MD and MPH. Commissioner Ramallo said that Catholic University in Washington, DC, offers that blend, and Ms. Klein said she was aware of several others that do as well.

The resource family concept is one part of a complicated process, and a good preliminary response to reducing timelines to permanency. The responsibility lies within the whole system, not just on the shoulders of one person, and the love and bonding offered by resource families is vital to the well-being of children in care.

#### **DCFS STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION**

Trish Ploehn presented the quarterly report of strategy implementation and case counts by regional office as of March 31. (These figures do not include any probation youth, even though the same Adoption and Safe Families Act—ASFA—standards apply.)

- Strategic decision-making, team decision-making, and the Permanency Partners Program (P3) are being implemented in every office.
- Point of engagement implementation will be complete in August.
- Concurrent planning implementation is complete in six offices and scheduled for five; union discussions are ongoing for the remaining eight offices.
- Open referrals, where an investigation is going on but no determination has been made regarding detention, have dropped by almost 5 percent since April 2004.

- Family maintenance cases, where children are served in their own homes, have increased by over 20 percent.
- Family reunification cases have increased by over 12 percent.
- Permanency cases are down by about 18 percent; more children are in legal guardianships, and fewer in nonguardian homes (long-term foster care).

The law mandates a move from a reunification focus to permanency within 12 to 18 months (6 months for very young children), and most permanency cases are children in care 18 months or more. About half are age 11 and below, and half are 12 and up. Younger children generally move to permanency faster, and older children emancipate out of the system. Pending legislation will allow youth to remain in foster care past age 18, which could be important for those with no guardian or adoptive home in sight. A high percentage of permanency children are not able to move because the relatives with whom they are placed will not adopt them, and staff is spending more time talking to relatives about legal guardianship. Ms. Ploehn handed out copies of *A Guide to Permanency Options for Youth*, a publication that the department is distributing widely.

Vice Chair Sorkin asked about the ethnic breakdown of permanency cases, and Ms. Ploehn did not have those statistics. In adoptions, between 40 and 45 percent are African-American, with the same percentage being Latino. The remainder are White, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, and other.

Commissioner Ramallo asked about barriers to the full implementation of concurrent planning, a backup plan that she sees as a matter of common sense. Historically, Ms. Ploehn explained, the first 12 to 18 months that a child was in the system, the focus was solely on family reunification. Case-carrying workers knew little about adoption, and only when the court terminated family reunification services were adoption or other permanency options explored. Now that permanency is being considered from the beginning, adoptions staff are involved right away. This is requiring a cultural change within the department, a first step of which was the permanency initiative begun in September 2005 that tasked each office with developing its own plan to increase permanency, based on its own community and resources. However, Dr. Sanders added, a family just entering the system doesn't want the social worker thinking on a dual track; they want an advocate for reunification. Unless a judge decides otherwise, workers legally must assume that the birth family is the most appropriate place for a child, and their first priority must be reunification. Workers must believe in the family, but also realize that the judge may terminate parental rights if the family doesn't meet necessary deadlines.

Presentations on DCFS staffing and on the medical hubs were deferred to another meeting.

There was no public comment.

**MEETING ADJOURNED**